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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in family functioning and resources, parenting style, and child outcomes in low-income families in which mothers were and were not employed. The participants were 194 low-income families whose children began kindergarten between 1992 and 1994. Child outcome measures included the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), two subscales of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (WJTA), and the Social Skills Rating System, completed early in kindergarten. Family characteristics were identified with the Family Resource Scale, Family Routines Questionnaire, the Parenting Dimensions Inventory, and an interview completed at kindergarten entry. Findings indicated that maternal age and depression were not related to employment. Maternal education and number of parents in the home were positively related to maternal employment. Employed mothers supplied their families with higher incomes and better access to community resources than unemployed mothers. Families with working mothers had more established routines than families with unemployed mothers. Employed mothers did not rate themselves any differently from unemployed mothers on parental nurturance, restrictiveness, consistency, or responsiveness. Controlling for maternal education and family type, the study found that employed mothers described their children as more assertive and responsible than did unemployed mothers. Children of employed mothers scored higher on the Applied Problems subscale of the WJTA but not on the Letter-Word Identification test nor on the PPVT, even when controlling for other family factors as covariates with maternal employment. (Contains 28 references.) (KDFB)

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# Maternal Employment in Relation to Family Resources, Family Routines, and Parenting in Low - Income Families

by

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## Introduction and Literature Review

The aim of this research is to examine the extent to which family functioning, parenting style, and child outcomes differ between low-income families in which mothers are and are not employed. Today, the majority of mothers of young children work outside the home, and the effects of maternal employment in both single parent and two parent families have been widely studied for the past 30 years. The initial concern was that long periods of separation necessitated by mothers working might negatively impact the cognitive or emotional development of children. Many investigators found, however, that maternal employment appeared to have neither a positive nor a negative effect on children (Burchinal, Ramey, Reid & Jaccard, 1995; Greenstein, 1993; Forgays & Forgays, 1993; Orthner, 1990; Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand, 1990; Howie, 1996). Some found that maternal employment was associated with more positive child outcomes (Vandell & Ramanan, 1992). It has been shown that outcomes in children of employed mothers vary depending on the family's overall resources, the mother's attitude toward her work, the degree of social support available, and child characteristics, such as gender (Bronfenbrenner, Alvarez, & Henderson 1984; Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Greenberger, O'Neil, & Nagel,

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1994; Hoffman, 1989). Several researchers have stated that research and policy in the US should focus on improving the quality of care for young children, regardless of who is providing that care (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989; Silverstein, 1991; Akabas, 1984).

Many investigators have examined maternal employment with respect to children's cognitive and academic performance. Most current literature has shown no relationship between child IQ or academic achievement in school age children and maternal employment alone (Greenstein, 1995). Satisfaction with the mother's employment status, working or not, was shown by Smith and Rotator (1994) to be related to higher grades in 5th and 6th grade children. Family factors such as marital stability, mother's satisfaction with the job and father's satisfaction with his role appear to have a stronger influence on child outcomes than maternal employment per se (Barling, Fullager, Marchl-Dingle, 1988; Leaner & Galambos, 1986).

In a review of the literature, Beyer (1995) concluded that maternal employment does not have a direct effect on children's academic achievement, but rather it affects parenting style, which in turn affects academic achievement. Parenting style moderates the effect of maternal employment. Other studies have shown that maternal employment significantly affects the level of paternal involvement with infants; and this trend continues as children grow (Bailey, 1994). Duckett and Richards (1995) found that children whose mothers were employed had more positive affect with their mothers, spent more time with their fathers, and seemed friendlier with their fathers. A study of first graders showed that it was not the factor of mother's employment, but rather shared activities with the child that resulted in more positive child outcomes (Moorehouse, 1991).

Does maternal employment in low-income families affect family resources? The obvious hypothesis is that maternal employment would give a family more resources than if mother were unemployed, but for low-income families employment in the available jobs may produce the negative effect of pushing the family just over the eligibility requirements for public assistance. A minimum wage job may give a family more monthly spending money than public assistance, but it might disqualify them from Medicaid, food stamps, WIC, free school lunch, public housing assistance, energy assistance, and many other benefits that are geared to the very poor. No literature discussing this issue was found.

Other questions considered in this paper address the effects of mother's employment on children's academic performance and social skills. Also examined were the effects on family routines, and parenting style. Are employed mothers less nurturing than their unemployed counterparts? Do families with working mothers set more routines for their children? These issues will be discussed in this paper.

## Methods

### Sample

The data are based on a sample of 194 low-income families in a southern town whose children began kindergarten in 1992, 1993, or 1994. These children and families are participating in a Head Start Transition Demonstration Project. One of 31 projects currently operating nationwide, the Transition Project is a longitudinal study to assess the benefits of providing services like those provided in Head Start to families and children during the child's first few years of public school. Maternal work status was not a criterion for enrollment in the study. Head Start graduates and also kindergartners from low-income families who were not Head Start graduates were recruited into the study at the beginning of the children's kindergarten year.

### Instruments

Extensive data are being gathered about child academic achievement and social adjustment as well as family background and functioning. Parents are interviewed at the beginning and end of the kindergarten year, and then subsequently at the end of each of the next three school years. Data presented here all come from the initial family interview conducted at kindergarten entry, and from child assessments conducted early in the kindergarten year. The only exception is that the Parenting Dimensions Inventory was administered to the mothers in the spring of the kindergarten year.

**Maternal Employment.** Mothers reported whether they were employed during the initial interview during the fall of the child's kindergarten year.

**Maternal Characteristics.** During the initial interview, mothers were asked about their

- level of education,

- age,
- whether they had a partner living in their household, and
- whether they had been depressed for at least two weeks during the prior year.

**Family Characteristics.** Parents are asked to complete a number of instruments including:

- Family Resource Scale (Leet & Dunst, 1985), measuring the perceived level of resources available to the family including income, shelter, nutrition, healthcare and so forth.
- Family Routines Questionnaire (Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983), which describes patterns of family activities like meal-time, play and homework routines.
- Parenting Dimensions Inventory (Slater & Power, 1987), asking about ways of disciplining children, and beliefs about childrearing.

**Child Outcomes.** Children were also assessed during the fall of their kindergarten year by testers trained and supervised by a certified psychologist. They administered the:

- Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1981))measuring receptive vocabulary, and
- two sub-scales of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989) measuring children's readiness skills in letter-word identification and understanding of basic numeracy concepts. In addition, during the family interview, the parents completed the
- Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliot, 1990), which asks how often children exhibit various social skills.

**Data Analysis**

Four sets of analyses were conducted. First, descriptively we computed means or proportions on eacn of the selected maternal, family, and child outcome variables for the families in which the mother was employed and those in which the mother was not employed. Second, a logistic regression was used to examine the extent to which the selected maternal characteristics were related to materiial employment status. Third, multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA) tested whether maternal employment status was associated with selected family variables in analyses that included as covariates the maternal characteristics associated with employment (from step 2). Fourth, MANCOVAs tested the extent to which maternal employment was associated with child outcomes after adjusting for the maternal characteristics identified in the second analysis.

**1. Descriptive Analyses.** Tables 1 - 4 list the means, standard deviations, or proportions on selected maternal, family, and child outcome variables. In addition, several other variables were examined descriptively.

**Table 1**

**Maternal Employment and Family Type (Single or Two Parents)**

| | Single | Two Parent | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Employed Mother | 64 (33%) | 43 (22%) | 107 ( 55%) |
| Unemployed Mother | 70 (36%) | 17 (9 %) | 87 ( 45%) |
| TOTAL | 134 ( 69%) | 60 (31 %) | 194 (100 %) |

More than half of the mothers are employed and most are living in single parent families.

**Table 2**

**Ethnicity by Maternal Employment and Family Type (Single or Two Parents)**

| | Employed | | Unemployed | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Single | Two Parent | Single | Two Parent | |
| African American | 58 | 29 | 61 | 10 | 158 (82%) |
| Caucasian | 3 | 9 | 7 | 5 | 24 (12%) |
| Hispanic | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 5 (3%) |
| Other | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 6 (3%) |
| Total | 64 | 43 | 70 | 17 | 194 (100%) |

A majority of the sample is African American. Caucasians make up 12 % of the total sample, with other minorities composing only 6 % of the group.

**Table 3**

**Education Level by Maternal Employment and Family Type (Single or Two Parents)**

| Mother's Level of Education | Employed | | Unemployed | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Single (n = 64) | Two Parent (n = 70) | Single (n = 70) | Two Parent (n = 17) | |
| Less than HS degree or GED | 4 | 6 | 23 | 4 | 35 (19%) |
| High School Grad. or GED | 25 | 15 | 29 | 2 | 71 (36%) |
| Some College or Technical School | 30 | 16 | 14 | 5 | 65 (34%) |
| Associate Degree | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 9 (5%) |
| Bachelor Degree + | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 12 (6%) |

The majority of the mothers had finished high school and taken some college courses, but 19 % had less than a high school degree.

**Table 4**

**Reported Income by Maternal Employment and Family Type (Single or Two Parents)**

| Income per Month in | Employed | | Unemployed | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dollars | Single | Two Parent | Single | Two Parent | |
| 0 -200 | 1 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 8 (4%) |
| 201 - 400 ** | 6 | 1 | 47 | 1 | 55 (29%) |
| 401 - 600 | 10 | 2 | 7 | 2 | 21 (11%) |
| 601 - 800 | 9 | 4 | 7 | 3 | 23 (12%) |
| 801 - 1000 | 14 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 24 (12%) |
| 1001 - 1500 | 17 | 10 | 1 | 2 | 30 (16%) |
| 1501 - 2000 | 4 | 14 | 1 | 1 | 20 (10%) |
| 2001 - 3000 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 11 (6%) |
| Total | 63* | 43 | 70 | 16* | 192 (100%) |

* Two mothers were unable to estimate the family's monthly income.

** Many families' main financial support came from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), usually averaging between $200 - $300 per month.

**2. Maternal Characteristics and Maternal Employment Status**

Maternal education, age, whether partnered, and report of depression were tested to determine whether they were significantly related to mother's employment status. Mother's age averaged 31 years in both employed and unemployed women. Approximately half of the mothers in both groups reported feeling depressed in the past year, but like age, this factor was not significantly related to employment. Maternal education level and number of parents in the home

were significant and positively related to maternal employment. Accordingly, both of these factors will be considered in all analysis looking at the effects of employment on the dependent variables.

**Table 5**

**Maternal Characteristics and Maternal Employment Status**

| | Employed Mothers (n = 107) %, M (sd) | Unemployed Mothers (n = 87) %, M (sd) | Logistic Regression $X^2$ | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| More than 12 Years of Education | 29% (n = 57) | 15% (n = 29) | 7.10 | .01 |
| Age (yr.) | 31.6 (5.1) | 31.0 (10.2) | 0.38 | ns |
| Partnered | 40% (n = 43) | 20 %(n = 17) | 7.5 | .01 |
| Depressed | 48% (n = 51) | 44% (n = 56) | 1.26 | ns |

**3. Multivariate Analyses of Family Characteristics**

Separate multivariate analyses of covariance MANCOVA tested whether families in which mothers were and were not employed differed in terms of resources, parenting style, and family routines. These analyses included maternal employment as the predictor of interest and maternal education and whether a partner was present in the household as covariates because as noted, these factors were significantly related to maternal employment in the first set of analyses. Three sets of family variables were analyzed - the subscale scores from the Family Resource Scale, the Parenting Dimensions Inventory and the Family Routines Questionnaire. The results for the Family Resource Scale are shown in Tables 6 - 8.

**Results**

**Table 6**

**Means and Standard Deviations from the Family Resource Inventory for Families with Employed and Unemployed Mothers**

| Resource Subscales | Employed Mother (n = 107) M (sd) | Unemployed Mother (n = 87) M (sd) | Comparison F (1,190) | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MANCOVA | | | 8.56 | .0001 |
| Income Resources | 10.8 (2.7) | 8.6 (3.0) | 16.00 | .0001 |
| Childcare Resources | 2.6 (2.3) | 2.1 (2.2) | 2.72 | ns |
| Community Resources* | 18.3 (3.8) | 15.1 (4.6) | 17.23 | .0001 |
| Intrafamily Resources** | 8.9 (1.4) | 9.2 (1.2) | 0.08 | ns |
| Shelter Resources | 14.1 (2.0) | 14.1 (1.9) | 0.83 | ns |
| Nutrition Resources | 23.4 (3.6) | 21.5 (4.2) | 1.68 | ns |
| Growth Resources | 34.5 (8.1) | 34.7 (8.6) | 2.15 | ns |
| Health Resources | 54.6 (10.0) | 53.2 (10.4) | 0.00 | ns |
| Overall Resources | 110.8 (16.0) | 108.5 (17.0) | 0.01 | ns |

Employed mothers are able to supply their families with higher incomes and better access to community resources. It is interesting to note, however, that employment did not predict significantly more resources for a family overall, nor did it effect several of the resource subscales.

* This subscale includes items about work, transportation, telephone, childcare, etc.

**Intrafamily resources includes two questions about having enough time for the family to be together.

**Table 7**

**Mean Subscale Scores for Parenting Dimensions and Family Routines**

| | Employed Mother (n = 107) M (sd) | Unemployed Mother (n = 87) M (sd) | Comparison F (1,190) | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Parenting Dimensions: | | | | |
| MANCOVA | | | 1.01 | ns |
| Nurturance | 5.4 (.6) | 5.3 (.6) | 1.26 | ns |
| Responsiveness | 4.4 (.8) | 4.1 (1.0) | 2.88 | ns |
| Nonrestrictive | 3.4 (1.0) | 3.3 (.9) | 0.27 | ns |
| Consistent | 4.5 (4.5) | 4.4 (1.0) | 1.06 | ns |
| Family Routines: | | | | |
| MANCOVA | | | 8.12 | .0004 |
| Routines to Promote Learning | 1.7 (1.7) | 1.7 (.5) | 0.20 | ns |
| Overall Level of Established Routines | 62 (9.6) | 56.7 (9.4) | 8.79 | .05 |

Families with working mothers appear to have significantly more established routines than families where the mother is unemployed. Working mothers do not rate themselves as being significantly more nurturing, restrictive, consistent or responsive to their children than non-working mothers.

**4. Multivariate analyses of child outcomes**

MANCOVAs also tested whether maternal employment was related to children's social, language, and pre-academic skills. Again, the model consisted of maternal employment status with maternal education and family type as covariates. This model was used to analyze children's language, academic readiness, and the mothers' responses about their children's social skills.

**Table 8**

**Mean Subscale Scores for the Social Skills Rating System**

| Social Skill | Employed Mother (n = 107) M (sd) | Unemployed Mother (n = 87) M (sd) | Comparison F (1,190) | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MANCOVA | | | 1.66 | ns |
| Cooperation - How Important | 13.5 (3.6) | 12.8 (3.7) | 0.83 | ns |
| Cooperation - How Often | 11.6 (3.6) | 11.1 (3.8) | 0.20 | ns |
| Assertiveness - How Important | 13.8 (3.3) | 12.4 (3.7) | 5.25 | .023 |
| Assertiveness - How Often | 16.0 (2.4) | 14.9 (2.8) | 6.43 | .012 |
| Responsibility - How Important | 13.3 (3.2) | 12.5 (3.3) | 2.37 | ns |
| Responsibility - How Often | 12.6 (2.1) | 11.6 (3.3) | 4.03 | .046 |
| Self Control - How Important | 15.3 (3.1) | 14.6 (3.0) | 0.94 | ns |
| Self Control - How Often | 12.0 (2.8) | 11.0 (3.3) | 3.37 | ns |

Data from this sample show that employed mothers had higher mean scores than unemployed mothers describing the importance they place on children being cooperative, assertive, responsible and self-controlled. Children of employed mothers were described by their mothers as being significantly more assertive and responsible.

**Table 9**

**Mean Raw Scores for Child Measures as a function of Maternal Employment**

| Child Measures | Employed Mother (n = 107) M (sd) | Unemployed Mother (n = 87) M (sd) | Comparison F(1,190) | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MANCOVA | | | 3.02 | .031 |
| PPVT | 49.7 (13.7) | 45.6 (13.5) | 1.93 | ns |
| WJ: Letter-Word Identification | 9.0 (3.3) | 7.9 (3.5) | 2.88 | ns |
| WJ: Applied Problems | 14.2 (4.0) | 12.5 (4.2) | 8.99 | .003 |

PPVT = Peaboby Picture Vocabulary Test

WJ = Woodcock - Johnson Tests of Achievement

Children whose mothers were employed did not score significantly higher on the PPVT and the Letter - Word identification portion of the Woodcock - Johnson than children whose mothers were unemployed. They did, however, score significantly higher on Applied Problems, and their mean scores on the other two measures were slightly higher. Thus, children of employed mothers did display a greater degree of kindergarten readiness than children whose mothers were unemployed.

**Follow-up analyses of child outcomes**

A post hoc analysis was conducted to determine whether the family resources and routines mediated the obtained relations between maternal employment and children's preacademic skills. The analysis model consisted of the analysis variable of interest - maternal employment, the covariates - maternal education and family type, and the hypothesized mediators - family resources (income, community support, intra-family support, nutrition, and growth support) and the family routines (total number of routines and routines to support to learning).

**Table 10**

**MANCOVA: Predicting child outcomes from maternal employment status and using as covariates all significant variables from earlier tables.**

| Child Measures | Employed Mother (n = 107) M (sd) | Unemployed Mother (n = 87) M (sd) | Comparison F (1,162) | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MANCOVA | | | 3.09 | .029 |
| PPVT | 49.7 (13.7) | 45.6 (13.5) | .84 | ns |
| WJ. Letter-Word Identification | 9.0 (3.3) | 7.9 (3.5) | 5.50 | .02 |
| WJ. Applied Problems | 14.2 (4.0) | 12.5 (4.2) | 7.45 | .007 |

This final analysis showed that even with the effects of all family factors that varied with maternal employment covaried, maternal employment still significantly predicted children's Woodcock-Johnson scores.

**Discussion**

The outcomes of this research reinforce many of the findings of other investigators. Mother's employment was associated with positive child outcomes, most notably improved kindergarten readiness in participating children. Maternal employment alone, however, was not the crucial factor for some child and family outcome measures. Mother's education level and the presence of a second parent in the home were significantly positively related to maternal employment. Better educated women and those with a second parent in the home are more likely to be employed.

Mothers who were employed did not report more overall resources than unemployed mothers, although their families had more income, and they were better able to access community resources such as child care. Unemployed mothers in this sample were nevertheless able to supply their family's basic needs through services such as public housing, Medicaid, WIC, energy assistance programs, etc. Families with employed mothers tend to report more established routines than families of unemployed mothers, probably caused by the time requirements of the job.

Self-described parenting styles of employed mothers did not differ from those of unemployed mothers. At entry into kindergarten, the children of employed mothers are described by their mothers as being significantly more assertive and responsible than their peers whose mothers are unemployed. These social skills could reflect the degree to which mothers encourage such skill development. It may be that more independence is required of children when their mother must balance work and home responsibilities. The fact that the homes of employed mothers are described as having more stable routines could also be a factor in helping children develop more

independence. Finally, data in this study indicate that at entry into kindergarten, those children whose mothers are employed score significantly higher on measures of achievement than children whose mothers are not employed. When follow-up data are available, analysis will be done to determine whether or not this initial finding of increased academic performance was consistent throughout the children's first four years of school.

**Abstract**

Data in this study indicate that, at entry into kindergarten, those children whose mother's are employed score significantly higher on measures of academic readiness than children of unemployed mothers. Also, at entry to kindergarten, the children of employed mothers are described by their mothers as being significantly more assertive and responsible than their peers whose mothers are unemployed. The results presented here are consistent with previous reports on maternal employment with respect to family and child outcomes. Factors of maternal education and the presence of a second parent were significantly and positively related to maternal employment. Mothers who were employed did not report more overall resources than unemployed mothers, even though they had more income. They did have more access to community resources. Families with employed mothers had more established routines than families of unemployed mothers. Mothers with jobs did not describe themselves to be significantly different from unemployed mothers on any parenting dimensions

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